

Committee on Resources, Full Committee

- - Rep. James V. Hansen, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6201 - - (202) 225-2761

Witness Statement

Conservation and Reinvestment Act

Testimony before the House Committee on Resources
by Dr. Philip K. McKnelly
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on this very important piece of legislation. My name is Phil McKnelly and I am here on behalf of the National Association of State Outdoor Recreation Liaison Officers (NASORLO) and the National Association of State Parks Directors (NASPD) and I want to tell you that both of these organizations are deeply committed to the passage of H.R. 701, The Conservation and Reinvestment Act. I would like to thank the sponsors of CARA for their strong and persistent leadership in trying to make this dream of millions of Americans a reality.

While my state and the organizations I represent here today heartily endorse CARA, I will focus my testimony on Title II, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Almost thirty-five years ago I started my professional career with the Arkansas Planning Commission trying to get a fledgling program off of the ground. That program, the original LWCF, was the result of a national study called the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission. That study took several years to complete and was hailed as the most significant piece of conservation legislation to be passed in the history of our country. While the LWCF program has accomplished a great deal, it has never quite lived up to the hopes and dreams it generated when it was created. I have seen the program grow and flourish during the late 1960's and 1970's, and I saw it fade during the 1980's and then die in the early 1990's. Finally, in the late 1990's our country saw an ember of hope among the ashes of LWCF and now, with strong leadership from the House and a renewed hope in the cities and states across America, we have a chance to turn a history of unfulfilled hope into a true legacy of stewardship and opportunity for the generations that follow us.

But my purpose here today is not to dwell on what might have been or to place blame for what went wrong with the dreams of 1965. My purpose is to endorse the legislation before you and convince you of the promise it holds. I will focus on North Carolina because it has been my adopted state for more than 20 years and I am most familiar with the problems and opportunities that exist there. I have visited with other State Liaison Officers and State Parks directors from other states and I am convinced that, while our issues may be different in the east than they are in the west, while the specific concerns in Texas may be different than those in Minnesota, there is a real need for CARA and LWCF in every state. I am absolutely convinced - and want to convince you - of the need for a national program to encourage and assist states and local governments to preserve their significant natural resources, to provide open spaces that will act as buffers that protect the water quality of our rivers and streams, to minimize the damage caused by natural disasters such as the floods and hurricanes my state has experienced during the past few years, and to provide opportunities for our children to grow and learn in a safe, healthy environment.

In North Carolina the average conversion rate of forests, farms, and rural lands between 1992 and 1997 was 156,300 acres per year - a sixty-seven percent increase over the previous ten years. The Charlotte/Mecklenburg County area will lose forty-one acres of open space a day for the next twenty years if the current development practices are allowed to continue. In the Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill), urban land area has grown more than three and a half times faster than the population

between 1959 and 1990. Thirty-four percent of North Carolina's coastal wetlands have been altered to the point they no longer fulfill their function of protecting water quality in our streams, rivers, and sounds. These trends are taking place at a time when the North Carolina State Parks System has documented over \$120 million dollars worth of land acquisition needed to complete existing master plans and almost \$300 million dollars worth of capital improvements necessary to complete and repair existing parks. The backlog of needs for parks and recreation land acquisition and development by local governments in North Carolina is approaching one billion dollars.

While the needs are great, the opportunities to preserve significant open space are also great. Large corporations such as Champion Paper, International Paper, and Duke Energy are divesting themselves of large tracts of undeveloped lands at an unprecedented rate. Lands that could be used, for parks, greenways, or public open spaces. With improved funding state and local governments could take advantage of these once in a lifetime opportunities and take a significant step toward making sure that future generations have forests, waterfalls, and clean, free flowing streams to appreciate and enjoy.

Because of the concentrated population growth in urban areas, pressure is growing on the public lands in close proximity to population centers and conflicts are growing among the recreation user groups because of crowded conditions on limited resources. Prime examples of these conflicts include the competition for open water on Corps of Engineers reservoirs swimmers and sailors face from personalized water craft, water skiers, and other power boaters. Another example of a growing conflict is the competition between mountain bikers, horseback riders, and hikers. The explosion of mountain biking has had a tremendous impact on the demand for additional miles of trail and the need to separate conflicting uses such as horses and mountain bikes. Also, the demand for off-highway vehicle trails and areas in growing at a tremendous rate - and North Carolina does not even have the population of snowmobile riders many other states experience.

While the states and local governments are looking to the federal government for assistance, it is important to note that they are also taking steps on their own to relieve the situation. In 1993 the North Carolina General Assembly authorized, and the citizens passed, a thirty-five million dollar bond issue for state parks improvements - the first bond referendum in the eighty-seven year history of the State Parks System. In 1994, based largely on the public support for the 1993 bond referendum, the General Assembly passed the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. A dedicated revenue source committed to land acquisition and capital improvements for state and local parks and recreation. In recent years the General assembly has also created the Natural Heritage Trust Fund (a dedicated stream for revenue committed to preserving lands with outstanding natural heritage values) and the Clean Water Management Trust Fund (a program directed towards the acquisition of properties that provide significant protection to rivers, streams, lakes, sounds, and the ocean and other preventive measures and solutions to water pollution.) Combined, these programs provide approximately fifty million dollars per year for parks, recreation, and open space projects. While this is a significant step forward, in the State Parks System alone, with over four hundred million dollars in identified needs and approximately fifteen to twenty million dollars per year from the dedicated funds, it will still take over twenty years to complete current master plans - and that scenario does not provide for the acquisition and development of any new parks. The needs in our local communities are equally great. In Fiscal Year 2001, North Carolina received two million four thousand dollars in LWCF assistance and has received applications from thirty-eight local governments requesting over ten million dollars in assistance.

There are other proposals to rekindle LWCF in addition to CARA, but they often omit a very important factor. To be effective, funding designed to address acquisition and development needs must be consistent. For example, opportunities mentioned earlier in this testimony such as the potential acquisition of land from major corporations involve large sums of money. North Carolina is currently exploring the possibility of acquiring a tract containing over two thousand acres of lake front property valued at approximately eighteen million dollars. To complete such an acquisition, the State will need to spread the transaction over three to five years and will need a stable source of funding for the duration on the project. If the recent history of

LWCF funding continues, North Carolina would simply not be able to enter into a contract that relied on matching funds from the federal government.

I have used specific examples from North Carolina because I am the most familiar with that situation, but other states around the country, such as Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, and Missouri are taking similar steps to help themselves and their local governments. My point is that states and local governments are committed to being good stewards of the environment, but they need some help to accomplish what has become a formidable task. The passage of CARA and Title III would make a significant impact on the backlog of state and local government parks and recreation needs, and it would also be a solid investment for the federal government. Every dollar the federal government provides to the states requires a local match of at least equal value. In many cases the grants are over-matched and the environment and our citizens benefit even more.

Another economic benefit our citizens would receive from this investment is the proven attraction parks and open space have for business and industry. As Will Rogers, Jr. has pointed out, "Too many community leaders feel they must choose between economic growth and open space protection. But such a choice is not necessary." This statement has been reinforced in North Carolina by the fact that two companies recently relocated to our state because of the quality of life available to their employees. Reichold Chemical Company recently brought five hundred jobs to the Raleigh-Durham area and Caterpillar, Inc. moved to Morganton after a twenty city search. In both cases greenways, open space, and the quality of life were cited as decisive factors in the relocation decisions. LWCF and CARA are good investments from at least two different perspectives.

The last point I would share with you is that this issue has a broad range of support. Nationwide, approximately thirty-five hundred communities and organizations have endorsed the legislation. The National Governors' Association, National Association of Counties, and U.S. Conference of Mayors are among the leaders of those supporters and organizations as diverse as The Nature Conservancy and the United States Chamber of Commerce have joined forces to get this bill passed. Also, major newspapers from New York to Los Angeles and Seattle to Miami have endorsed CARA, and just last year the U.S. Congress passed a very similar bill with 315 votes in the affirmative.

In summary, HR 701 is the highest priority in this Session of Congress for NASORLO and NASPD and we are ready to do what ever is necessary to help you complete the effort initiated and passed in the House last year. Last Session eleven of our twelve North Carolina Congressmen co-sponsored the bill and we intend to do at least that well again this year. The one member who did not co-sponsor CARA last year did vote for the measure every time he had the opportunity. I urge you to give this important piece of legislation a favorable recommendation and move it forward in the process as soon as possible. On behalf of NASORLO, NASPD, and North Carolina I appreciate this opportunity to testify before the House Resources Committee and look forward to working with you to make this tremendous opportunity a reality.

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